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ABSTRACT

Blacks in the United States can relate to, and should participate in, the country's bicentennial celebration because of their many contributions to the country's growth and development. This paper briefly discusses the fact that blacks in this country have a long record of achievement, beginning before the Mayflower, and it outlines some of these achievements in the fields of exploration, invention, science and medicine, freedom, government, the military, and the arts--including literature. (JM)

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We, Too, Sang America: Blacks Contributed to America's Progress

Abstract

The author emphasizes the reasons why black Americans should proudly participate in the Bicentennial Year activities. She justifies her stand by pointing out black achievements which began with America's discovery, first birthday and continuing through the present. The author believes that if anyone has earned the right to celebrate the Bicentennial, blacks have!

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We, Too, Sang America: Blacks Contributed to America's Progress

Was it appropriate for blacks to celebrate America's 200th birthday on July 4, 1976? Should we have felt a justifiable pride in the nation's progress? Could we relate to the Bicentennial? You bet we could! We are natives of this country and much of the early progress was a result of one blood, sweat and tears. The Bicentennial observances and celebrations would indeed have been distorted and incomplete without recognition ~~to~~ of the historic role and presence of nearly 25,000 black Americans. ~~Charles~~ Quarles Aptly stated:

> It is certainly safe to count blacks among the founding peoples of our country. Like other early arrivals, they found the land was already inhabited. . . . But of those who came here in the wake of Columbus, the black component was among the very first to arrive, whether in the Spanish colonies in the 1500's or the English settlements in the early decades of the following century. At the end of America's colonial period, one inhabitant in six was black. (p. 241)

These newcomers, bound in chains, were brought against their will; nevertheless, their distinctive stamp has been left upon the fashioning of our nation. Blacks have participated in every phase of America's growth and development, so it is fitting and proper that they should participate fully in its Bicentennial celebration. Blacks, as well as

other minorities, have a strong record of achievements in this country. These achievements, however, are not generally known. Many people know very little about the rich historic role played by blacks of this nation, and it is conceivable that some may consider American history to be the story of white people. Not so!

Blacks came to America long before the Mayflower. According to the Negro Almanac, "Negroes are among the first explorers to come to the New World." Pedro Alonso Nino, identified by some scholars as Negro, arrives with Columbus; other negroes accompany Balboa, Ponce de Leon, Cortez, Pizzaro and Menendez on their travels and explorations." (p. 1) The first American to die in the struggle to make this nation independent and free was black . . . and yet, he himself was not free. This is certainly not a widely-known fact. Recently this man's name was mentioned in a class of undergraduates, and only three students had ever heard of Crispus Attucks and, of course, they knew nothing about his supreme sacrifice for this nation's independence. Blacks have made, and are still making, vital contributions to America's aims and goals. Quarles believes that:

> The meaning of America, a matter of special timeliness, during this Bicentennial period, can hardly be understood unless we take note of its black people, participants in every vital aspect of this country's total experience. To know America better, at its best or

worst, we must know the historic black American better. (p. 247)

A Bicentennial period is a time to reflect upon the past. There is no better time to look back down the road from whence we came and survey our achievements. We were here and we have proved it in all the ways that count. You will recognize many of us as we emerge and parade before you, but no doubt some of us will be strangers to you.

Explorations

. Estevanico - led an expedition from Mexico into the territory of the American Southwest; is credited with the discovery of what is today Arizona and New Mexico (1538).

. Matthew Henson placed the flag of the United States at the North Pole in 1906.

Inventions

. Norbert Rillieux - invented the multiple-effect vacuum evaporator which changes the juice of the sugar cane plant into sugar crystals (1845). Basically, his system is in universal use throughout the sugar industry and in the manufacture of soap, gelatin, glue, and many other products.

. Jan Matzeliger invented the shoelasting machine which not only revolutionized the shoe industry, but also made Lynn, Massachusetts the "shoe capital of the world."

. Garrett Morgan - His inventions save lives. In 1912, Morgan received his first patent on a safety hood and smoke protector. The most significant of his later inventions was the first automated three-way traffic light, 1923.

. Granville T. Woods: "Black Edison." During his lifetime Woods obtained some 50 patents, including one for an incubator, the forerunner of present machines capable of hatching 50,000 eggs at a time. In 1887, he received a patent for the most advanced of his many inventions--the multiplex railway telegraph.

. Benjamin Banneker constructed what was probably America's first clock--a wooden "striking" clock so accurate that it struck every hour and kept perfect time for 20 years. Banneker is better known, however, as a surveyer who helped to lay out the blueprint for Washington, D.C.

Science and Medicine

. Dr. Charles R. Drew developed a technique for separating and preserving blood, and did vital research in the field of blood plasma. His work helped to save countless lives during World War II.

. Dr. Daniel Hale Williams was a pioneer in open heart surgery, and in 1893 founded the Provident Hospital in Chicago.

Freedom

. Crispus Attucks and a dozen other soldiers stood up to the "Redcoats" during the Boston Massacre in 1770. The run-away slave who had to be free was the first American to die in our war for independence.

. Peter Salem achieved hero status during the Battle of Bunker Hill, 1775.

. Harriet Tubman, "Black Moses" and "conductor on the underground railroad," escaped from slavery, and during her 19 returns to the South helped to transport more than 300 slaves to freedom.

. Ralph Bunche was a United Nations mediator, and Nobel Prize Winner in 1950.

. Martin Luther King, "the peaceful Warrior," led many successful freedom marches and in 1964 received the Nobel Peace Prize.

Government

. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. was the first black congressman from the East, 1944.

. Shirley Chisholm is a black representative from New York.

The Military

. General Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., in 1945, was named

commander of Godman Field.

. Henry Ossian Flipper was the first black cadet to graduate from the U.S. Military Academy; born into slavery, he was commissioned a second lieutenant in the cavalry in 1877.

The Arts

. Lorraine Hansberry was a popular playwright in the 1950's. Her best known work was "Raisin in the Sun."

. Virginia Capers is a well-known modern-day actress starring in "Raisin."

. Hector Hill was a well-known painter whose approach to art was mirrored in his simple dictum to take a wide look around.

. Isaac Hathaway is one of America's outstanding ceramists and is widely known for his fine work in sculpture.

. Meta Warrick Fuller is a productive and well-received sculptor. Her work is housed in the Cleveland Museum and in the Schomburg Collection in New York City.

. Gwendolyn Brooks is a popular poet of today.

. Mikki Giovanni's poetry is well received by today's youth.

. Alvin Ailey heads a nationally-famous dance troupe.

The foregoing list of black achievements is necessarily limited, but effort was made to include what may be some of our lesser-known accomplishments. Because our achievements in the sports, entertainment, religious, and educational fields are fairly well known, they have been omitted.

More than fifty years ago, the noted authority on black life, W. E. B. Dubois, asked the question: "Would America have been America without her Negro people?" The answer is a resounding "no." The Bicentennial period gives us an opportunity to "probe afresh our past so that we may discover who we really are rather than what we hoped or fancied we were." (Quarles, p. 247) Well done, America.

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